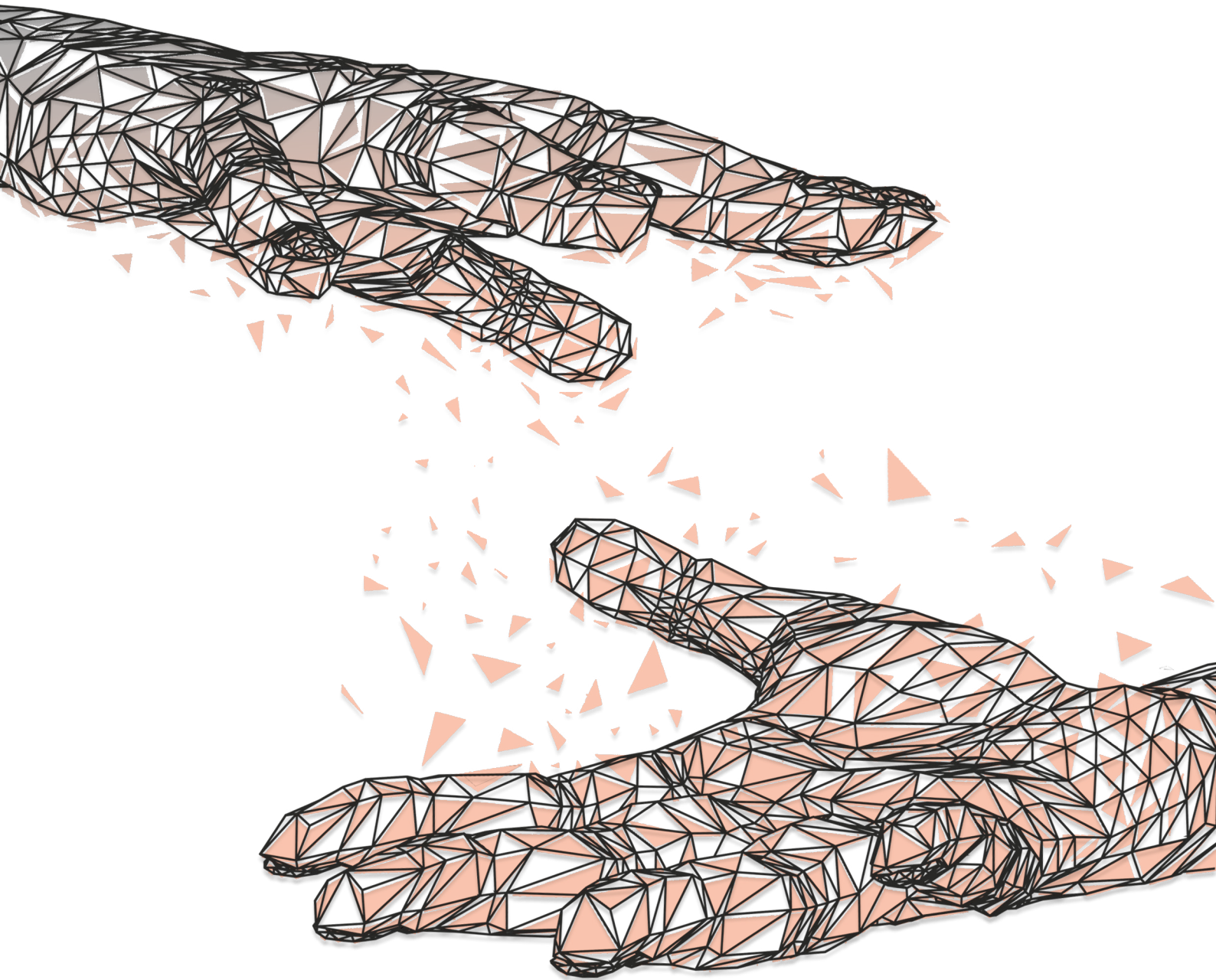


COUNSELLING PRACTITIONER BEGINNER TO ADVANCED



A TO C
THINKING

This is a useful model for practitioners helping their clients to understand how it is that they are perceiving situations and relationships. It is one you may well wish to share with clients. A to C thinking offers us a framework for analysing our thoughts, emotions and behaviours. This framework, originally stemming from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), is built on the premise that our beliefs influence our emotions, which impact our behaviours and the consequential outcomes of these behaviours.

By becoming more aware of the nature of our interactions with the world and addressing these, we can then start changing our behaviour and experiences for the better.

This model is based on Albert Ellis's observations on the way in which emotions, thoughts and outcomes relate to one another. He believed that many of our problems are as a result of irrational thinking, or 'faulty cognitions'. Ellis observed that by becoming aware of this thinking, and becoming more rational, we can deal with a lot of our unwanted pain.

The foundation of the model:

A = Activating events in our lives that trigger an emotional response.

B = Beliefs (our beliefs are revealed through our thoughts that come about when the Activating Event happens)

C = Consequential outcome (behaviour, emotional response, action)

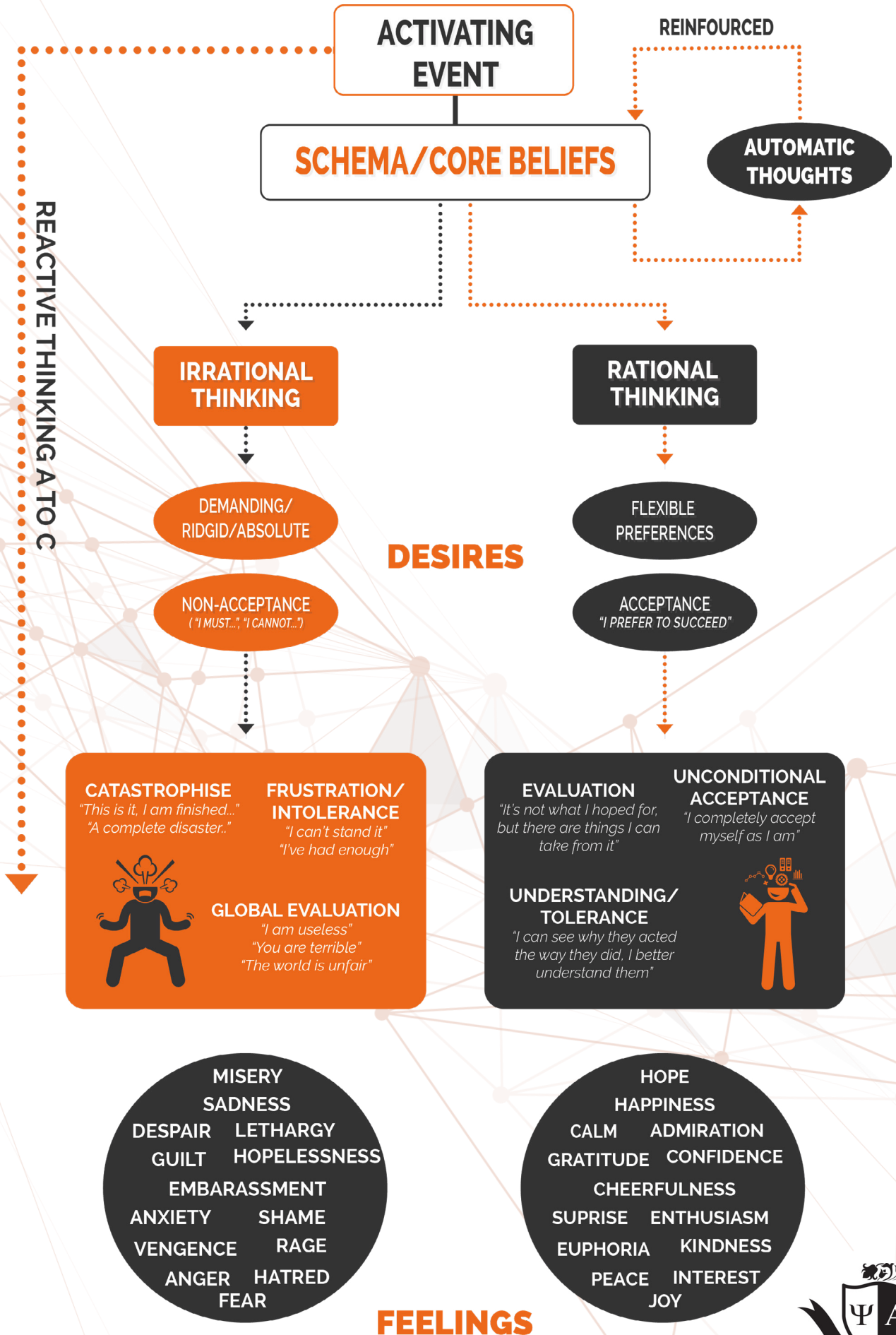
A = C THINKING (REACTIVE)

This is a reactive approach to life. You'll notice there's no B. It's a cause and effect equation. If you don't understand what is happening in B, then you'll not understand why you feel the way that you do.

The diagram on the next page illustrates how the ABC model works[1].



A EVENT / EXPERIENCE
B BELIEFS AND THINKING
C CONSEQUENCES



The activating event can be the event that first establishes a core belief, or it can be an event later in life that we are responding to, having adopted schemas or core beliefs. These kinds of beliefs may be helpful or they may be very unhelpful.

We adopt these core beliefs primarily in our youth, as we're developing. If they are positive beliefs, then it can be important later in life to be aware of those beliefs so that you can live your life in accordance with them. If we live in a manner that contradicts our core beliefs, then it can have negative consequences.

With negative core beliefs, these can arise because of traumatic experience in early years or adolescence, although they need not be overtly traumatic but even just received via modelled behaviour. So if a parent feels inherently worthless, then it is entirely possible for the child to adopt the same belief without any explicit 'trauma', and the individual may well feel that they have had a very happy childhood.

Of course, when trauma is encountered, and parents repeatedly criticise a child, without any apparent means of avoiding this criticism, then a negative belief may develop, eg "My opinion doesn't count", "Whatever I do tends to go wrong", "I am an unlucky person", "I am ugly and unattractive" etc

When we come to experience activating events (A) in later life, they are seen through the lens of these core beliefs (B). So if a person is rejected by their romantic partner and they have a core belief that they are unattractive, they will probably;

- 1) have automatic thoughts that reinforce their negative belief, 'oh yes, they've discovered I'm unattractive'
- 2) Process their experience through their irrational thinking (B), perhaps being non-accepting of themselves and arriving at the global evaluation that, 'I am fundamentally unlovable' (C), experiencing miserable feelings as they do so.

A CLOSER LOOK AT ACTIVATING EVENT / CONSEQUENTIAL OUTCOME

ACTIVATING EVENT: Someone else gained the promotion I wanted.

CONSEQUENCES: I'm depressed and don't believe I was good enough to get the promotion.

When we adopt this type of thinking, it's very easy to get caught up in the blame game, assigning misguided reasons to our emotional response.

Reactive thinking doesn't tell the whole story. It doesn't account for the part we play in the processing of information inside of our own minds. This is where the A to C framework comes in helpful.

When we understand how we are processing information, we can take full responsibility for how we choose to respond to that information. That variable alone can lead to a very different consequential outcome.

This is the missing link that helps us go from feeling out of control to having self-control; from being reactive to proactive in how we live our lives.



Empowerment comes from taking responsibility, and that's what happens when we take a proactive approach to life.

When we account for our B (beliefs), we consider how we're processing this information before jumping to a conclusion. It means we think before we act and consider how our processing of information could impact that consequential outcome.

A + B = C (PROACTIVE)

Let's look at how the consequential outcomes are impacted by the role we play in processing information.

ACTIVATING EVENT

Someone else gained the promotion I wanted.

BELIEF

(Non-acceptance / Rigid) I have to get that promotion, I deserve it more than anyone else, I cannot fail to get that promotion.

CORE BELIEF - 'You get what you want by demanding it'

CONSEQUENTIAL OUTCOME

I'm angry, frustrated. I feel like I want to quit. I'm certainly not going for the promotion again.

BY EXAMINING BELIEFS

I realise my core belief is working against me, my dad always told me to demand what I wanted, but maybe that's not right for me.

I realise my thinking is rigid and doesn't accept any outcome other than the one I want. If I can introduce flexibility, understanding and acceptance of myself I can begin to view this differently;

"When I think about it, I haven't done everything I can to get that promotion, it's a good lesson, which I'm going to learn. I'm excited. I have a chance to work hard, focus on what's required and maybe get the promotion I wanted quicker than I thought".

Now it's your turn. Outlined on the next page is an exercise that you can use to begin practising the ABC Framework right away. Use the instructions on the pages that follow to help you complete the table below. This will help you to begin identifying any unhelpful thinking patterns that may be holding you back in life.



NOTE: When working through this cycle the first thing we usually notice is how we're feeling so begin with the consequential emotion that you've experienced. The primary process for completing the ABC worksheet is as follows:

ACTIVATING EVENT

3. Write down what triggered your feelings:

UNHELPFUL THINKING PATTERN

5. Identify the unhelpful thinking pattern for each thought:

BELIEFS

4. Write down the thoughts and beliefs that went through your mind:

CONSEQUENCES

1. Write down your emotions:

2. Write down your actions:



1. In the 'Consequences' box, write down the emotion that you're feeling. Examples of emotions include:

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Envy
- Guilt
- Hurt
- Jealousy
- Shame

2. In the 'Consequences' box, write down how you acted. Make a note of how your behaviour changed when you felt the negative emotion. Examples of the behaviour that individuals often identify in this box include:

- Catastrophising
- Being intolerant• Showing frustration
- Making a global evaluation (I am useless, you never help...)
- Avoiding something
- Becoming withdrawn, inactive or isolated
- Being aggressive
- Binge-eating or restricting your food intake
- Escaping from a situation
- Procrastination (putting something off)
- Seeking reassurance
- Taking alcohol or drugs
- Withdrawing from the situation

3. In the 'Activating Event' box, make a note of what triggered your feelings. Triggers or activating events that you might put in this box can include:

- Something that's happening right now
- Something that happened in the past
- Something that you are anticipating will happen in the future
- Something in the external world (an object, person or place)



- Something in your mind (an image or memory)
- A physical sensation (increased heart rate, fatigue, headache)
- Your own emotions/behaviours

4. In the 'Beliefs' box, make a note of any thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs. Describe what the event (whatever you've put in the 'Activating Event' box) meant to you when you felt the emotion (what you've written in the 'Consequences' box).

The thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs you put in the 'Beliefs' box often pop up reflexly. They may be extreme, distorted, and unhelpful – but they may seem like facts to you. Examples of these might include:

- Here I go, proving that I'm useless once again!
- I should have known better!
- Now everyone knows what an idiot I am!
- This shows that I can't cope as normal people do!

Thoughts are what count, so consider yourself as a detective and set out to capture the suspect thoughts. If your thoughts are in the form of a picture, describe the image, or what the image means to you – write them down in the 'Beliefs' box.

5. Lastly, In the 'Unhelpful Thinking Patterns' box, consider what your unhelpful thinking patterns may be. One of the best ways to become more objective about your thoughts is to identify the patterns that may exist in the thoughts you list in this box. When you detect a pattern it may well lead you to an underlying schema or core belief.

Below you'll find a list of questions designed to help you become more aware of the active role you currently play in situations. Understanding how you process this information can lead to more mature and helpful responses in the future, in turn leading to better outcomes.

- 1.** What evidence do you have for these beliefs?
- 2.** What alternative views/ possibilities are there?
- 3.** Are you thinking realistically?
- 4.** What unhelpful thinking patterns are present in your thinking?
- 5.** What outcome would you like?
- 6.** What action(s) can you take that align with your desired outcome?



Use the space below to make additional notes of any key learnings or insights:



References:

David, D., (ND). *Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy in the Context of Modern Psychological Research*. Retrieved from: <http://albertellis.org/rebt-in-the-context-of-modern-psychological-research/>

